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ABSTRACT

Disappointment in public education seems to have inspired an increased interest in private education. Data provided by the Center for Education Statistics, the National Catholic Educational Association, and the Bureau of the Census Current Population Survey were studied to assess the trend from 1976 to 1985 concerning the number of schools, students, and teachers in private education as opposed to public education. According to the data, the number of public schools decreased at a constant rate while the number of private schools increased at a constant rate; the trend in student enrollment seems to support the trend in the number of schools; and the number of full-time equivalent private school teachers increased moderately at first, then very strongly, while the number of public school teachers decreased at first, then recovered. The data also reveal that Catholic schools do not account for the increase; instead, Christian/fundamentalist schools seem to be responsible for the increase. Generally, the data imply that the role of private education is increasing. Six tables are included. (RG)

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PRIVATE ELEMENTARY/SECONDARY EDUCATION:

Recent Trends in Number of Schools, Students, and Teachers

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Private Schools: Some Basic Trends

David B. Orr*

Although private elementary/secondary education has a long history in this country, it has not until recently been much in the public eye. As disenchantment with the public schools has increased in the last few years, however, there has been a corresponding rise in interest in the role played by the private sector in providing education at the elementary and secondary levels. Some have theorized that the private schools provide an alternative to those who feel that public education has suffered from diminishing levels of quality. Others postulate that the resurging conservatism evident in the country in other areas during the last decade or two has resulted in a growth of private sector/schooling

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* Formerly with the Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Dept. of Education. The opinion and interpretations expressed herein are those of the author and do not represent the official position of the U.S. Government or the U.S. Dept. of Education in any way.

catering to the more conservative elements of the education constituency. Others, however, pointing to some losses experienced by one of the more visible segments of private education, the Catholic schools, suspect that the private school sector has experienced the same demographic influences as has the public school sector, and that those influences have been in the direction of decreasing numbers of elementary/secondary age children with consequent diminution of numbers of schools and students.

The definitive data to answer all of these questions do not exist. Nonetheless, it is possible to examine data which do exist for answers to the related question, what has been the trend in the last decade with respect to numbers of schools, students, and teachers in the private sector as compared to the public sector. This paper presents the results of such an examination.

Data for this paper have been gathered from several surveys of private education conducted by the Center for Education Statistics (CES)* during the period from 1976 to 1985. Rather than simply presenting the differences at the two end-points of this period, an intermediate point at

1980 is also given. This break serves two purposes. First it clarifies trends by introducing an intermediate point in the interval being presented. Second, there was a significant change in the methodology used in conducting the CES surveys which resulted in two sets of data for 1980--an original and a revised set. As these two are not directly comparable, it was decided to present the first part of the decade as the difference between the 1976 and 1980 (original) figures, which are generally comparable to each other; and then to present the second part as the difference between the 1980 (revised) figures and 1985, which are also reasonably comparable to each other.

In an effort to develop some corroboratory evidence to support the information gleaned from the CES survey, data on Catholic schools collected by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) were also studied. The NCEA collects data from Catholic schools (private,

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* Formerly the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

parochial, and diocesan) on a yearly basis, largely through the dioceses. It purports to cover the Catholic universe of schools completely, although some content areas are covered aperiodically on a sampling basis.

Some supplementary data is also available through the Bureau of the Census Current Population Survey (CPS), which, each October includes some basic education questions. These data are referred to later in connection with enrollments, as this source does not produce information on schools or teachers. The CPS is based upon a national household survey sample of some 60,000 households.

Schools

Turning first to trends in numbers of schools, Table 1 shows data for the public schools which were gathered by CES through its Common Core of Data program, and reported in various issues of the Digest of Education Statistics (puublished annually or semi-annually by CES). It can be seen that the number of public elementary/secondary schools has decreased from 89,400 to 86,500 to an estimated 84,200 over the decade in question. This decline is, as far as we know, almost entirely a result of declining numbers of the school-age population to be educated. Private schools, on the other hand, moved up somewhat from 1976 to 1980, and again, from 24,500 to 25,600, in the period from 1980 to 1985.

Table 1 - Numbers of public and private elementary/secondary schools 1976-1985.

Schools (Fall)	Total	Public*	Private
1976	109,500	89,400	20,100(1)
1980	107,300	86,500	20,800(2)
	111,000(3)		24,500(3)
1985	109,800	84,200(5)	25,600(4)

(1) NCES January 1981

(2) NCES December 1984 and 1983-84 Digest Table 38

(3) NCES December 1984 - retrospective corrective based on 1983-84 survey area frame.

(4) NCES 1985-86 survey, uncorrected for estimated 1983-85 "growth".

(5) Projected from latest (1983-84) data.

* Pro-rated to include special ungraded, and alternative school based on unpublished figures (CES).

Percentagewise, the changes may be summarized as shown below:

	Public Change	Private Change
1976-80	-3.2%	+3.5%
1980-85	-2.7%	+4.5%

These data suggest that the drop in numbers of public schools has been relatively steady over the decade. Private schools, on the other hand, seem to have displayed consistent growth. This observed growth of private schools comports well with anecdotal evidence reported from time to time that private schools have burgeoned in recent years, and is consistent with the hypothesis that the resurgence in conservatism has resulted in the recent establishment of significant numbers of Christian/ fundamentalist schools. There is no direct evidence available to CES to support this interpretation of the private school increase, however.

Some information which may bear indirectly on the matter can be derived from examining data for the Catholic segment of the private school sector. CES surveys permit the breakout of results for the Catholic schools, and the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) also conducts occasional surveys of its constitutent schools. Although CES and NCEA data do not agree entirely (probably as a result of sampling variability and slight coverage differences), the general picture is that the number of Catholic schools either declined, or at best remained stable, over the period in question, and that any increases in the numbers of private schools must have come from other segments of the private school sector. Table 2 presents the Catholic data for schools, enrollments, and teachers from both CES and NCEA.

The changes in numbers of Catholic schools in percentage terms, from the two sources are given below:

Table 2 - Numbers of schools, students and (FTE) teachers, 1976-1985 (Center for Education Statistics and National Catholic Education Association Data)

Schools	CES	NCEA
1976	9966	9976
1980	9600	9559
1980 (rev.)	9900	9559
1985	9900	9245
Enrollments (000's)		
1976	3423	3609
1980	3100	3106
1980 (rev.)	3400	3106
1985	3600	2821
FTE Teachers (000's)		
1976	146.0	150.6
1980	146.0	145.7
1980 (rev.)	149.3	145.7
1985	164.4	146.6

	CES Change	NCEA Change
1976-80	-3.7%	-4.2%
1980-85	0.0%	-3.3%

It should be noted that, based on a total of 9900 Catholic schools in 1985, the CES totals did not differ from the NCEA totals by an amount greater than the standard error range in 1985. Therefore, the apparent difference in the two data sources may be only sampling error. In any case, as a whole, the data certainly argue against the Catholic segment as the source of recent growth in the private school sector.

In summary then, during the decade of 1976-85, public schools declined in number at a relatively constant rate, while private schools increased at a relatively constant rate. The growth in number of private schools did not appear to have come from the Catholic segment of the sector, thus indirectly supporting the hypothesis that the anecdotally reported increase in number of Christian/fundamentalist schools may have a basis in fact.

Student Enrollments

Enrollment data do not of course necessarily parallel school data in terms of numbers. However, in this case, as Table 3 shows, there is a consistent pattern. Public school enrollment declined throughout the period, although at a somewhat lesser rate during the latter half. Such declines have been characteristic since the "baby boom" children began to transition out of the system in 1972. The slackening of the decrease during the latter half of the decade probably reflects some recovery of the birth rate. In any case, the number of public school children declined from about 44.3 million in 1976 to about 39.5 million in 1985.

At the same time, although private school enrollment declined during the first half of the period, it exhibited a sharp increase during the latter half, as comparedstent with the data for numbers of schools, which showed continued growth through the period. The percentage changes are given below:

Table 3 - Student enrollments for public and private schools, 1976-85.

Enrollments (000's)	Total	Public*	Private
1976	49,484	44,317	5,167(1)
1980	45,949	40,987	4,962(2)
	46,287(3)		5,300(3)
1985	45,495	39,513	5,982(4)

(1) NCES, January 1981

(2) NCES, Digest 1983-84, Table 38

(3) NCES, December 1984, retrospective correction based on 1983-84 survey area frame.

(4) CES 1985-86 survey, uncorrected for estimated 1983-85 "growth corrections.

* Unpublished CES figures - include special education, ungraded and alternative schools.

	Public Change	Private Change
1976-80	-7.5%	-4.0%
1980-85	-3.6%	+12.9%

Thus, the trends which were observed in connection with numbers of schools tend to be supported in terms of student enrollments. Public school enrollments continued their long term decline (although at a somewhat slackened pace during the latter half of the decade being studied). Private school enrollments definitely improved from the first half of the period to the second half (going from a decline to an increase), while numbers of schools also increased in the first half as well as in the second. In sum, then, both numbers of schools and numbers of students suggest a growing role for private education during this period, while changes in these figures for public schools hint at a slackening decline.

As reference to Table 2 shows, data for the Catholic schools confirm the decline in the reach of this system during the first half of the period. As was true for schools, both CES and NCEA data show substantial declines in student enrollment in Catholic schools during the period of 1976-80.

Both sets of data show some improvement during the latter half of the decade, although the NCEA figures show substantial continued decline while the CES figures show some recovery. Thus, on the basis of these figures, the question as to whether the overall recovery of private school enrollments during the period 1980-85 was attributable to the Catholic segment of the private sector, or elsewhere, seems moot.

Full-time Equivalent Teachers

If the case for an increasing role on the part of private education is valid, there should also be some discernable evidence to be had from looking at the numbers of full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers over the same time span. Table 4 presents the figures. Here it may be seen that public FTE teachers declined slightly from 1976 to 1980, but recovered some during the period of 1980 to 1985. On the other hand, private FTE teachers improved modestly during the first half of the decade, but finished the latter half very strongly. The overall number of FTE teachers estimated for 1985 was 2.21 million for the public sector and 359 thousand for the private sector.

The percentage changes are shown below:

	Public Changes	Private Changes
1976-80	-1.1%	+3.0%
1980-85	+2.2%	+19.3%

Table 4 - Numbers of private and public fall-time equivalent (FTE) teachers, 1976-1985.

FTE Teachers (000's)	Total	Public*	Private
1976	2,455	2,186	269(1)
1980	2,439	2,162	277(2)
	2,463(3)		301(3)
1985	2,569	2,210	359(4)

(1) NCES Digest, table 38, 1983-84

(2) NCES Digest, table 38, 1983-84

(3) Revised, NCES December 1984, based on 83-84 survey

(4) Estimated from 336 F.T. + 1/3(69) part-time, based on 1985-86 CES surveys.

* Unpublished CES figures

Again referring to Table 2 showing the Catholic data, it is again clear that there was a turnaround which occurred during the latter half of the subject decade. CES figures show no change while Catholic figures declined in terms of number of FTE teachers during the 1976-80 half of the decade; both sets of data improve for the 1980 to 1985 period, however, CES figures rising 10.1% while NCEA figures broke through to +0.6%. These data suggest that even though the Catholic enterprise may have diminished somewhat over the decade there appears to have been a trend toward increasing numbers of FTE teachers in both public and private sectors.

Synthesis

The reader will by now have become disturbed, or annoyed, or both, at the various disparities in the data presented. It is important to note however that the data presented so far are quite consistently supportive of the trends which are the primary concern of this paper. The discrepancies in the specific estimates derived from, say, NCEA and CES data, are most likely the reflection of differences in coverage and methods. Yet, they seem to say some of the same things.

The most important of these seems to be the recent growth in the private sector, even in the face of largely unfavorable demographics. While the public schools have continued to reflect diminishing numbers and enrollments over the period of 1976-1985, although the decline in

enrollments appeared to have moderated somewhat during the latter half of the period, the private school consistently increased in number over the same period. Enrollments in the private sector decreased from 1976-80 at about half the rate of public enrollment decreases, but then experienced a resurgence in the 1980-85 period. FTE teacher data were consistent with these findings, and suggested an overall trend toward higher numbers of teachers. Public school teacher figures trended up from a small decrease to a small increase over the 10 year period, while private school data went from a moderate to a sharp increase during the period. Catholic data suggested declines at least in the early half of the decade and were stable to mixed during the latter period.

Can these trends be supported from other sources? Data from the CPS can be adduced to examine the enrollment issue. Again, methodological differences have produced a great difference in the specific figures when CES and CPS data are compared. Table 5 shows CES data for both schools and enrollments over the periods examined in terms of the percentage share accounted for by private schools, along with the percentage share of private enrollments taken from CPS data (CPS data for schools are not available).

According to CES data, the proportion of total schools to be found in the private sector has grown consistently over the decade. Although there remains the methodological ambiguity in the Center data for 1980, the percentage there is clearly intermediate between the 18.4% for 1976 and the 25.3% for 1985. Center data for the percentage enrollments in the

Table 5 - Private School Enrollments as a Percentage of Totals, (CES and CPS data) and Private Schools Percentage (CES data only), 1976-85.

	CES		CPS
	Schools	Enrollment	Enrollment
1976	18.4	10.4	9.8
1980	19.4	10.8	10.2
1980	22.1	11.5	10.2
1985	25.3*	12.3*	10.9

* Based on 1985-86 survey data, corrected to include estimates of population growth since 1983-84. Uncorrected figures were 23.3 and 13.3, respectively.

private sector parallel the school data. Most importantly, although CPS data are not directly comparable, because of the differing methodologies (household survey vs. school survey and differing definitions of schools to be included), the trend is still the same, showing increasing percentages of private school enrollments. It should be noted that these CPS figures are based upon kindergarten through grade 12. If nursery school figures were to be included, the CPS figures would be somewhat larger and would begin to approach or exceed the CES enrollment figures (in which only part of the nursery school population is included). Specifically, the CPS figure for N-12 for 1985 allocates 13.8% of total enrollment to the private sector. This sharp difference arises because of the disproportionately high private school representation at the nursery school level.

In general then, it would appear that the CPS data support the overall conclusion that the private school role is enlarging.

A final issue to be addressed in this section is the source of growth in the private school sector. Data discussed so far suggest that the source of growth has not been the Catholic segment. No direct data exists to

Christian/fundamentalist movement. Some evidence of an indirect nature does exist, however. CES data has been collected according to three basic categories of private schools: Catholic, Other Religious Orientation, and Nonsectarian (Non-Affiliated). There was a change in wording in the 1985 survey from "other religious affiliation" to "other religious orientation" which may have resulted in the shifting of some schools from the "non-affiliated" category to the "other religious" category, but the issue here is to find out if the Catholic decline has been accompanied by a growth which could be interpreted as reflecting an increase in the support the hypothesis that much of the growth has come from the Christian/fundamentalist segment of the private school sector. Table 6 presents the percentage growth over the decade in question in both numbers of schools and enrollments, for the three basic categories of private schools. It may be seen that the number of schools in the "Other Religious" category has grown sharply in both halves of the decade, but particularly in the latter half. It may be surmized that a major portion of the decline in the "Not Affiliated" group of schools from 1980 to 85 resulted from the change in wording discussed above, and that this represents to some degree a shift of the Christian/fundamentalist group (which preferred "Not Affiliated" to "Other Religious Orientation" when the latter was defined in terms of denominational affiliation) to the "Other Religious Orientation" category. Be that as it may, it is clear that the major/ growth in the private school sector has taken place in the category which should contain most of the Christian/fundamentalist schools. The enrollment data parallel the school data, and support the same conclusion.

Table 6 - Percentage changes for three categories of private schools, in numbers of schools and enrollments, 1976-85 (CES data).

	Catholic	Other Religious	Not Affiliated
		Schools	
1976-80	-3.7	+9.4	+12.7
1980-85	0.0	+30.1	-21.0
		Enrollments	
1976-80	-9.4	+2.0	+5.5
1980-85	+5.9	+36.4	-4.7